

Talking to Your Patients About Electronic Health Records

Like you, health care providers across the nation are using electronic health records (EHRs) to increase the quality, safety, and efficiency of health care. Research suggests, however, that patients have a limited understanding of EHRs. As a provider, it is important for you to engage your patients in a conversation about health information technology, and about EHRs in particular, to answer their questions. Below are some questions you might receive from your patients as well as suggestions on how you might answer them.

What Is an Electronic Health Record?

An electronic health record is not just a computerized version of your paper chart. It's a digital record of your health information that can provide your care team with comprehensive health information about you. Over time, it can allow your providers to share important information, across different health care settings, in accordance with federal and state privacy and security requirements.

This is one of the key features of an EHR: It is designed to allow appropriate information sharing beyond the health care provider who first collects the information. It is built to share information with other providers, such as labs and specialists. It can contain information from all the providers involved in your care in a practice setting, or it can link through secure information networks to information held in other providers' EHR systems. And, as health information exchange capabilities advance further, the information can move with you—to the specialist, the hospital, the nursing home, the next state, or even across the country.

What Information Does an Electronic Health Record Contain?

An EHR includes information about your health, such as:

- Medical history
- Diagnoses
- Medications
- Immunization dates
- Allergies
- Radiology images
- Lab and test results

How Can an Electronic Health Record Help Me?

Storing health information in an EHR has potential benefits for you as well as for your health care providers. Benefits to you include:

Better care.

With an EHR, all of your health information can be in one place. A networked EHR system can give providers more accurate and complete information about your health, so you receive the best possible care.

Better care coordination

Having information in electronic form means that it can be shared easily with the people who ensure that you are receiving the care you need. Because providers have the ability to share information with other providers involved in your care, the care you and your family receive is better coordinated

More involvement in your care

You can fully take part in decisions about your health and those that you are caring for. By making all your health care providers aware that you have an EHR they will be able to securely share information with you electronically, for example, through a personal health record.

How Is my Health Information Protected?

Privacy and security safeguards are in place to protect your personal health information. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) Privacy Rule, a federal law, requires your health care providers to give you a Notice of Privacy Practices to inform you how your information may be used and shared, as well as how you can exercise your rights under the HIPAA Privacy Rule. The same privacy rules that protect your paper records also protect your EHR.

Additionally, the HIPAA Security Rule, also a federal law, gives you rights over your health information and sets rules and limits on who can look at and receive your health information. Standards include access controls, like tracking who can access your health information and password protections. With EHRs, in fact, there are additional security features like passwords and digital fingerprints to safeguard your information.

Resources from the Government

Regional Extension Centers (RECs):

On-the-ground technical assistance to providers, including helping explain the benefits of EHRs to their patients, is provided by the 62 RECs funded by Recovery Act grants from the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology. To find the REC serving your area, please visit <http://healthit.hhs.gov/programs/REC>.

The HHS Office for Civil Rights:

To help your patients understand their privacy and security rights under HIPAA, visit or refer your patients to <http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/privacy>.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services:

Regional CMS staff support and conduct local outreach and education about EHRS and financial incentive programs available to eligible providers to increase adoption and meaningful use of EHRS. Find your CMS Regional Office at <http://www.cms.gov>.